

NATION NOW

Information warriors: Here's how the U.S. is combating 'fake news' from Russia

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Credit: Jorge Silva, AP

In this Nov. 11, 2017 photo, President Trump and Russia's President Vladimir Putin talk during the family photo session at the APEC Summit in Danang, Vietnam.

WASHINGTON — The State Department prepares to get its first funds to tackle Russian meddling in U.S. politics as U.S. intelligence warns that its interference in American elections continues.



Funding for the mission is finally expected to arrive this month as an agreement to transfer \$40 million from the Defense Department is expected soon, more than doubling its current budget of \$35 million.

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Senior managers at the Global Engagement Center described its mission to USA TODAY in a secure office at the State Department's headquarters here. Then-president Barack Obama created the center in 2016 to counter terrorist propaganda. Now it's focusing on a new threat to democracy: meddling and misleading information by Russia and other countries.

All the officials except Daniel Kimmage, the center's acting coordinator, requested anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

What is the Global Engagement Center?

The center replaced centralized U.S. efforts to combat terrorist propaganda with an approach that works more with local partners abroad who better understand their audiences, the communications platforms they use, and local threats.

"We're now a coordinating body and incubator of ideas," Kimmage said.

How does the center do that?

The center's 66 employees coordinates with U.S. agencies, such as the FBI and Department of Homeland Security, to target the American audience. It works with social media companies that have been used to spread foreign propaganda. And it also consults with foreign governments who face similar threats.

France, Germany, Estonia, Ukraine and the Czech Republic have had recent experience countering Russian disinformation efforts.

What's new about subversive propaganda?

Part of the center's mission is to keep up with rapid changes in technology and methods used by its adversaries. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State once spread their message through videos and recordings of their leaders' speeches online. Now they use advertisements on social media to direct potential recruits to encrypted messaging applications such as Telegram for private conversations and eventually face-to-face meetings to plan terrorist acts.

Last year, the center ran a project targeting people deemed vulnerable to such Islamic State recruitment in Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, and in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. The project focused on people who'd viewed ads by the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, on Facebook

and had Telegram installed on their phones. And like the terrorists do, State Department employees engaged people in one-on-one conversations to ask about their concerns. Most were interested in emigrating to the United States, while others wanted to bring jobs to their neighborhoods, Kimmage said.

"Just like ISIS can use technology to reach out to people vulnerable to their message, we can reach out to people vulnerable to engaging in terrorist activity and pull them back from the brink," said Jonathan Henick, former principle deputy director for the Bureau of International Information Programs.

How much of a difference can the center make?

Russia, Iran, North Korea and China each have numerous state-owned media outlets spreading their messages and targeting different audiences through multiple social media platforms, often with misleading information designed to confuse or stir up controversy in the West.

In some places, like Syria and Iraq, the U.S. is trying to counter propaganda from terrorists and from Russia and Iran, which try to blame the U.S. government for ISIS' strength, creating greater risk for U.S. troops on the ground.

U.S. programs also target audiences in dozens of countries on cellphones, television and online.

Instead of challenging every false message, the center seeks to help other groups implement what works. It is sending teams to the Czech Republic, Scandinavian countries and Germany to learn how those populations counter hashtag campaigns and automated fake accounts called "bots."

In France, media companies joined forces to vet online news and identify fake stories before they were published. President Emmanuel Macron has proposed outlawing the dissemination of false information around election campaigns.

The center will seek out what works, but "we're not there yet," Kimmage said.

How can the U.S. help allies?

In the Caribbean, a foreign government asked the center to advise on talking to the press about a counter-terrorism police operation. The center provided advice on how to change the message from day to day, and how not to alienate the local population.

Better messaging could help to prevent further radicalization that might result from clumsy government communication, center officials said.

How can allies help the U.S.?

The center also consults with allies about how to counter state sponsored propaganda from Russia, Iran, China and North Korea. Each U.S. ally faces a slightly different challenge, and some of their approaches might work in the U.S. while others would not.

A law to criminalize "fake news" might work in Singapore or France, but in the U.S. it would clash with the First Amendment.

In Slovakia, a central Europe country where some citizens want to drop out of the European Union, has developed a high school class to discern real information from false messages on their smartphones. That approach might be more applicable to an American audience.

In general, the Europeans are keenly aware of Russian disinformation, one of the center officials said.

Can the U.S. keep up with its adversaries?

During the 2016 elections, Russian media tried to spread a false story about the U.S. blocking independent international election observers from polling places.

The State Department had video of international election observers in Ohio and elsewhere that it sent to people in Latin America and the Middle East who were vulnerable to that message.

Henick said it is not clear how often the center will be able to act so quickly.

"It requires working in real time," Henick said. "It remains to be seen whether we'll be nimble enough to do that on an ongoing basis."

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